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GOVERNMENT COMPUTER NEWS

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Feds take steps toward paperless contracting

Cultural, technological and budgetary obstacles to an electronic environment remain

BY KEVIN MCCANEY | GCN STAFF

The road to paperless contracting is strewn with paper.

"Until we take the print button off the screen, there will be a lot of paper printed out," said Richard Comerford, deputy director of the Interior Department's National Business Center. He wasn't being entirely facetious, but he didn't blame it all on the print button either, citing cultural, technological and budgetary barriers to a purely electronic environment.

How far along is the government, overall, in its quest for paperless contracting? "We're probably about 40 percent there," said David Griffin, project manager for the IT Solutions Shop, part of the General Services Administration's Federal Technology Service.

"We've automated some processes," he said, but major parts of the puzzle, such as supply chain management, aren't operating yet.

Comerford and Griffin were among a group of officials who spoke about paperless contracting at a recent conference in Virginia. Comerford described the process of going paperless at the National Business Center and other agencies as gradual, one of "bold moves in small steps."

The center, for example, has gone online with a host of functions, including electronic requisitions and requests for proposals, he said. Its next steps will be to put grants processing online, automate invoices and receipts, and pilot an online program that will update users on the status of their orders.

"But change is slow," Comerford said, "because of the culture." Among the contributing factors: People get comfortable with processes; regulations change; systems need to mature; businesses sometimes aren't ready for the next step; security concerns aren't always resolved; and standards aren't set.

Wall of confusion

Michael S. Sade, director of acquisition management and procurement executive for the Commerce Department, said the challenges have multiplied along with procurement options. There used to be three ways to conduct a procurement, he said. Now, in the wake of reforms, "there are all kinds of ways. And I don't know of any one system" that meets everyone's needs.

Sade listed security concerns and the uncertainty of budget allocations as hurdles to going paperless. But he too said the biggest barrier was cultural, including an aging work force and turnover among young workers.

Griffin, whose IT Solutions Shop is largely electronic, said auditors often "aren't on the same technology." The shop is paperless, Griffin said, "in that a document posted to the system [in one of many formats] can go through the system without paper." But the ink starts running when auditors arrive.

"They're getting better," he said, offering an example of auditors who worked on the shop's systems. "They came in the door, and we gave them user IDs, and they were OK with that." But even then, auditors might need printed documents to take back to their office.

Storage is another hurdle: How should an agency store records and keep archives affordable and accessible as technologies change? "The longer you're in paperless contracting, the more it costs to maintain," Griffin said.

Besides the long-range need for reliable security and common interfaces, he recommended finding a process ripe for change and stressed the importance of management support. Assign a small, knowledgeable group to design and implement the system, he said. And keep any project to a size that can be up and running quickly.

"Don't wait for perfection," Griffin said. If you do, "you'll probably be waiting a long time."

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